RELIGION AND THE MEDIA
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In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God . . .
And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us . . .

That is how the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, begins: with a word, an act of communication, a speaking and a hearing. It is a word spoken clearly, plainly, not in esoteric language, secret code, but common language people use and understand. This primal word, Christians believe, became flesh: this primal act of communication, this divine journalism, occurred in history, in the world — the world of people and institutions, politics and economics, education and religion.

Before launching into the topic, therefore, the rationale for the entire exercise — the fundamental conviction shared by Jews and Muslims and Christians — that God cares deeply about this world, that God is involved in this world, all of it, human life at its most grand and most intimate, its most sublime and most tragic and most enigmatic.

Karl Barth said that the preacher must have the open Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Religion and journalism, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Abrahamic tradition which includes Islam, are siblings, at least first cousins. And so I am delighted to kick off this important exercise here at Chautauqua: *The Media and the News: Applied Ethics.*

I took Barth seriously. I read the newspaper — as an act of intentional discipleship. If this world is the focus of God's intentional, ontological communication; the Word made flesh; and if God so loves this world as the Gospel of John and innumerable sign wavers beneath goal posts at NFL games maintain, the preacher and the thoughtful layperson need to know and at least try to understand what is going on in this world. So, all the way back to the halcyon days when James Reston wrote for *The New York Times*, I have made a point of including in my early Sunday morning devotions and preparation for worship and preaching, a Psalm, a New Testament passage, and the editorial section of the *Times* and now the *Chicago Tribune*.

And so when, out of the blue, a delegation from the Board of Trustees of the Christian Century visited me in 1998 and made the astonishing

suggestion that I become Editor and Publisher, I did not have to think long about a response. For the record, I am still the pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and I manage both institutions because two wonderful colleagues actually do most of the work — David Heim, the Executive Editor of the Christian Century, and Dana Ferguson, the Executive Associate at Fourth Presbyterian Church. The two institutions and their business offices are located a mile and a half apart on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, and so I spend a fair amount of time in cabs, on CTA buses, and walking, between the two, trying to stay out of David's and Dana's way.

I have learned a lot about journalism, religious journalism in particular. And I have learned about the fragile nature of niche magazine publishing. It seems like a small journal dies somewhere every week, journals of literary criticism, poetry, commentary. Magazines that have bit the dust recently: *Partisan Review*, highly respected literary criticism, *The Other Side*, an independent, *Christian Social Action*, United Methodist Church, *Christian Network Journal*, *The Witness*, feisty, progressive established in 1917, *Zion's Herald*, Boston Wesleyan Society since 1833 and now with a new name, *The Progressive Christian* and *Punk Planet*, just last week, which, for 13 years documented underground music.

Caught in a perfect storm of rising postage and production costs, declining readership of all print media, and advertisers looking to maximize their reach, small journals are squeezed. The fact is, you cannot charge enough for a subscription to pay the cost of publishing a small journal. And big, lucrative advertisers: General Motors, United Airlines, Dewars Scotch, and Gucci accessories do not come our way. So it is a challenge to make it work and I am happy to say that it is working at the Christian Century. Our subscriber base is growing steadily — to just under 40,000. Our advertising clientele continues to see us as a good venue to communicate with their market: book publishers, seminaries, conferences and public events. And we are learning the secret of long-term viability in this business, namely an endowment, to which people who believe in the mission of the magazine contribute and which will assure independence.

The Christian Century was founded at the beginning of the 20th century, out of a commitment to the public and political nature of Christian faith. Charles Clayton Morrison bought a defunct Disciples of Christ magazine for $1,200 and launched the Christian Century out of a widely shared belief that the 20th really might be the Christian Century. It was called the Social Gospel movement: if people of faith and good will and generosity and love worked together and worked hard in every dimension of society, we could usher in the Kingdom of God — the Christian Century (see Jason Byassee, *Why Religious Journalism is Boring*).

It didn't work out the way the social gospellers hoped. Not only didn't the Kingdom of God come, the 20th century turned out to be unspeakably violent — marked by human suffering — on an unprecedented scale. . . The magazine maintained a strong pacifist and isolationist position after World War I, and during the rise of fascism in Germany and Spain. Reinhold Niebuhr, who was identified with the magazine and regularly contributed articles broke with the Century over what he regarded as its naïveté in the face of real evil in the world — in the form of Naziism. Niebuhr thought liberal Christianity had forgotten about the reality of sin — and espoused a new Christian Realism — that takes evil and the responsibility to confront it, and if need be, fight it, seriously. He founded his own journal, *Christianity and Crisis*, which expressed his brand of Christian Realism until its demise in 1993.

But the magazine from the outset waded into an area heretofore unexplored — the intersection of faith and life, religion and culture, religion and politics, economics, art, education. When the 20th century ended — the hoped for "Christian Century" and the 21st began many of our readers thought it was time for a name change. We talked about it a lot. For some time we did not mean what the founders meant, that we will help usher in the Kingdom with progressive politics and economics. But we do mean that faith and life, religion and culture do continue to intersect in ways that are dynamic, sometimes hopeful, sometimes demonic and tragic, but always important. Besides as Martin Marty suggested in one of these soul searching conversations: "If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it."

We set out to be a thoughtful conversation on the issues of the day, the world, from a faith perspective. We added a phrase to our masthead: "The Christian Century, Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully." We publish a unique form of journalism: articles of 3,000 to 4,000 words, short for scholars, long for most media with the exception of *The New Yorker*. We take positions on issues when we feel it is appropriate. We strive for balance. We do not agree among ourselves — on abortion, for instance, or stem-cell research, Palestine-Israel. And we invite dialogue. When an article stirs up critical response we often publish the readers' responses and invite the original writer to answer. We hope to be a place where civil but strong conversation happens.

That alone is an important aspiration with ethical implications. In a speech delivered to the incoming class Yale Dean, Peter Salovey, said that "what passes for thoughtful contemplation and conversation in these times — whether one is pondering evolutionary biology, human development, literary theory, or new movements in the arts, (let alone politics) — has become shrill, polarized and simplistic. Discourse seems often to have the following structure: consider no more than two possible sides to a question, place them in opposition, focus on the approach you consider correct, and

caricature, then nullify, and ultimately dismiss the opposing point of view" (*Beyond Caricature,* Yale Bulletin and Calendar, 9/25/05, Vol. 34, Number 2).

The Christian Century aspires to be an alternative to that. My personal aspiration is to provide a unique and indispensable resource for thoughtful clergy persons, laity and thoughtful people who regularly wrestle with the moral complexity of the world in which we are living and are regularly struck by the beauty and mystery and potential of life itself.

A lot of attention is paid in the religious community these days to religion in the media. The hue and cry is heard regularly in our precincts that no one pays attention to us: that the only time religion gets news space is when someone blows up a building, or molests a minor, or runs off with the endowment. Church news is pretty much confined to conflict, controversy and fights mostly about sex. I remember a conversation with Bill Coffin once with a group of clergy. "Why don't we ever make it in the papers?" someone asked. "Do something interesting and you will," Bill retorted. But you might want to be a little careful. My colleague Jason Byassee delivered a paper at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary with the arresting and revealing title, *Why Religious Journalism is Boring.* "Most religion is predictable," he says. "If you're looking for a hot news item on Sunday morning, you're not likely to find it at First United Methodist, unless there's a fight." The Roman Catholic mass, Jason says, is designed to be boring. (We gather, sing, sit, pray, listen, give money sing and go home. What is there to report?)

His interest in the boredom of religious journalism started with reading the religion pages of newspapers back in North Carolina. "The energy level was so much lower than anywhere else in the paper." Byassee thinks the Religion page of the *Chicago Tribune* is pitiful and I agree. It's mostly trivial: last week most of the page was given over to a Jewish folk singer, the week before the dedication of a small statue in a small Catholic parish, honoring martyrs. Not exactly the kind of material that compels me to turn from the Sports section. Someone called the traditional Religion section the Saturday ghetto — from which we need to be freed. And in fact, something like that seems to be happening.

The Dallas Morning News, long regarded as the major metropolitan daily that did the best job with religion — a full weekly section of the paper, balanced, inclusive, lively — just won its 10th consecutive Religion Communication Council Award for excellence and simultaneously canceled the entire section.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently combined religion with its "Living" pages. The *Wichita Eagle* dropped its religion editor.

Some — mostly from those who think there is a culture war being waged against Christianity — see it as further evidence of the plot to take God away from America.

It's not that simple. Print journalism itself is in trouble. The Annual Report on American Journalism announced the net loss of 600 full-time journalists in 2005, and twice that many last year. The decline in print news is a reality. All the forecasts show a downward trend in newspaper readers. Part of it is the Internet. My children don't subscribe to newspapers: they are all well informed and start their day at their computers. A month from now I'll be in a beach house in Holden Beach, North Carolina. The nearest *New York Times* is fifteen miles away. My son-in-law will print and deliver the news to me from the online *Times*.

Martin Marty says "Religion and faith and values sections are dying, not because there is not enough to report on in 'religion.' Religion has seldom been so newsworthy . . . "

What seems to be happening is that there is much, much more religion throughout the newspaper — uneven to be sure, some out of utter ignorance — I'll return to that — but it's there in virtually every page. At the same time, as more and more people use computers to access news and to interact with it, something brand new is emerging. Brad Owens at Baylor University observes that "religion tends to be a topic especially covered on the Internet. Websites and blogs feed people's interests more than traditional forms of journalism."

Dallas Morning News editor Robert W. Mong, Jr. continues to take seriously the high interest in religion among readers: "Religion now competes for page one space and the paper's religion blog continues to grow in popularity.

So what is going on? A University of Rochester journalism class did a study of top American newspapers and concluded that print media coverage of religion is uneven, plays up the negative, ignores many faith groups altogether, mentions religion fleetingly and most anecdotally, and pays lots of attention to scandal, because that's what people find interesting. I recall a speech and conversation with Ron Magers, the very popular and respected evening news commentator in Chicago, Channel 7, ABC. Someone asked him why the evening news seems to be solely about mayhem, violence, fatal accidents, murder and rape. It was not long after the O.J. trial, and the 24/7 television coverage. Magers said that the local ABC affiliate tried to limit the trial coverage and was immediately crushed in local viewer polls. "Don't tell us we're giving you stuff you don't want.

You love it: if you don't, change channels of turn it off, but the truth is people love it and want it."

Sobering. The Rochester study revealed that reporters don't understand religious institutions, traditions, vocabulary — and are very uneven in coverage. For instance, Joseph Lieberman is regularly described as an Orthodox Jew, and Mitt Romney as a Mormon. That Rumsfeld is a Presbyterian was never, so far as I know, mentioned. Other politicians' religious affiliations are not regarded as newsworthy. And in the matter of media ignorance I had a personal experience. During President Clinton's travails I preached a sermon and referenced a biblical head of state. David, who had some sexual issues, was ultimately forgiven and carried on. It was, as you recall, a controversial topic and the sermon received a lot of buzz. A reporter called and said he had heard about the sermon and wondered how the response had been. And, "Oh," he said, "who was that David guy?"

So we find ourselves in a new place. Religion sections and religion pages are declining — at the same time newspaper readership is declining.

The reason, by the way, is economic — not in my estimate because the press is more secular than it used to be or is a party to a cultural war on Christianity. The religion page simply doesn't garner advertising revenues — because, I think, it's not very interesting. In fact, when a congregation I served once analyzed its investment in an ad on the religion page and talked to one of its own newspaper reporters he shocked us all by saying, "If your purpose is to reach people other than other ministers and church members, get it off the religion page. The best place for a church ad is in the sports section, or comic page — nobody but preachers are reading it."

At the same time religion is a part of many national and international news stories — and a growing number of people are getting their news and responding, talking back, communicating, that is to say, about religion, ethical and moral topics from the Internet and blogs.

I want now to think a bit about the big moral question — for me: the importance in a free society of an aggressive and independent press.

Why is it that every President, certainly this one, regards the press, at some point or another, a challenge to be managed, a nuisance to be tolerated, a tool to be manipulated, perhaps even an enemy? Why, one might ask, does every administration, certainly this one, conclude that the press is out to get them, will not tell the unbiased, unvarnished truth about what is happening? So for the sake of truth telling and, always, national security, the administration and its several departments, need to astutely manipulate the press in order to get its own story out: famous in recent memory, hiring Public Relations firms to write positive stories and then pay

for them to be printed in the foreign — in this instance — the Iraqi — press. I was part of a group of clergy visiting and touring the Pentagon and meeting with spokespersons not long ago. We heard a speech by the civilian head of the Army Corps of Engineers which was essentially a 20-minute rant about how terrible the press was, how the news in the newspapers is not the whole story, how reporters, editors and broadcasters are clearly part of a conspiracy to make the President and his administration look bad. Having gotten up a full head of steam he concluded by saying something like, "There is nothing in the newspapers that is true — nothing — absolutely nothing. I don't subscribe to a newspaper. There's nothing in the newspaper worth your time. Any questions?" I raised my hand — "How about the baseball scores?"

There is a built-in adversarial relationship between people in power and an institution that insists on knowing and reporting to the people everything that is happening in the world and behind the doors of chambers and offices where huge decisions are being made. There are times when the security of the nation warrants and demands secrecy. But it is the nature of power not to want to allow a public to know what is being said and what is going on. It is no accident that the very first thing a dictator does — from Hitler to Stalin to Castro to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela — is shut down the free press and establish its own state-operated news media.

And it is no accident that the founders built into the Bill of Rights — a remarkable provision that here, in a nation built on the notion of liberty — there shall be a free press: that we will hold ourselves open to all the fuss and nuisance and irritation a free press entails:

> Amendment I: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Where did the founders get the notion behind that remarkable provision?

They were Enlightenment thinkers. They really believed in the basic reasonableness of people, that given full information, people will come to right judgments about how to govern themselves. But there was also enough Calvinism among them to distrust people and people in power, to preserve that freedom. So they passed that Bill of Rights as soon as possible, and they created a system of checks and balances because, in Martin Marty's pithy analysis, they were just Calvinist enough to not completely trust anyone. So they built into the very foundation of the

republic a provision for a free and unfettered and uncontrolled — by the state — press. They didn't think of corporate control — that's our issue.

It continues to be one of the jobs of religion to remind us that we are not perfect, that we are prone to make a mess of things if left totally to our own devices, that the society needs a balance of power and the corrective of open query, challenge, push back and dissent.

Reinhold Niebuhr concluded in the 1930s that only a theology that had forgotten about sin could watch the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Christian realism demands that we be wary, suspicious, careful about unlimited power and prepared to dissent and push back.

How important is this? Consider . . . Jim Wall, my predecessor as Editor of *The Christian Century*, wrote a column recently, "Unchecked Sources" (5/15/07) which cites the opinion of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser, that the administration's relentless use of the phrase "war on terror" has created a culture of fear that has had a pernicious impact on American Democracy, on America's psyche and on U. S. standing in the world.

The press, Brzezinski concludes, has been far too compliant, eager for slogans to throw to the public, has become a partner in the war on terror.

Wall observed that the *Washington Post* carried 140 front page stories making the case for the war in Iraq.

The consequences, Brzezinski concludes, are disastrous and dangerous. The relentless invocation of a "war on terror" has "undermined our ability to effectively confront the real challenges we face from fanatics who may use terror against us." The term he says is essentially meaningless. "Terror is not an enemy but a technique of warfare."

The Christian Century interviewed Bill Moyers recently (4/17/07). Moyers was press secretary for Lyndon Johnson, an ordained Baptist minister, and in my estimation, one of the most reliable, honest and insightful journalists working today.

We asked him about the similarities between President Johnson's decision to commit the nation to a war in Vietnam and President Bush's initiation of a pre-emptive war on Iraq.

"You shouldn't go to war for a Grand Theory on a hunch," Moyers said. . . "both plunged into local quarrels only to discover too late that they were treading in quicksand. And they learned too late that America exceptionalism doesn't mean we can work our will anywhere we please."

Furthermore, “both rushed to judgment on premature and flawed intelligence” — Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin incident and Bush’s nonexistent Weapons of Mass Destruction and Saddam Hussein’s non-relationship to al Qaeda and 9/11.

Why, we asked, in the build-up to the war didn’t the media ask tougher questions? Moyers’ response is instructive. “There are many reasons. The attacks of 9/11 brought a surge of solidarity that understandably engulfed journalists too. The event made asking critical questions difficult and unpopular. When cable networks started reporting civilian casualties as a result of American actions in Afghanistan, for example, the ‘patriot police’ came knocking. Later, if you challenged what the Administration was saying they charged you with being un-American and unpatriotic for wanting evidence that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11.”

We asked Moyers to assess the health of the media. He dug in. “There are world class journalists at work out there and they’re committed to getting as close as possible to verifiable truth. Unfortunately,” he went on, “a few huge corporations now dominate the media landscape. And the news business is at war with journalism.”

Moyers’ concern is that “virtually everything the average person sees or hears is determined by the interests of private, unaccountable executives and investors whose primary goal is increasing profits and raising the company’s share price.”

Two thirds of our newspaper markets are monopolies and they’re dumbing down. The major morning broadcasts devoted long segments to why Britney Spears shaved her head, and the death of Anna Nicole Smith got more attention than the identities of the Americans or Iraqis killed in Baghdad that week.

Moyers is concerned — and I agree —about an ideologically driven press that is contemptuous of reality, serves up propaganda as fact and attempts to demonize anyone who says otherwise. Its embodiment is Rush Limbaugh. Millions heard him take journalists to task for reporting on Abu Ghraib — which he attempted to dismiss as young guys blowing off steam, not different from a skull and crossbones initiation.

Where is there hope? I am a Presbyterian who believes in Vocation — God calls us to important work. I am hopeful because of Moyers — NPR — and Edward R. Murrow — individuals willing to take risks and pay the price of Truth Telling — prophets. And the Internet is already changing the way many people get the news and while the challenge remains separating the wheat from chaff, at least it is radically and awesomely free. And if you

believe, as I do, that the more freedom we have the more hopeful things are — that is a good thing — a very good thing — even if, like me, you still far prefer the hefty feel of a newspaper in your hand with a cup of coffee each morning. Two papers are better than one — two that see the world slightly differently — for me *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* and occasionally — when I absolutely have to — *The Wall Street Journal.*

Thank you!